

## Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-03 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 L-03 PRS-01

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4167

INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA

AMEMBASSY ATHENS

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LISBON

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY OSLO

AMEMBASSY OTTAWA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY REYKJAVIK

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BRUSSELS 05289

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MASS, PINT, BE

SUBJECT: F-104 REPLACEMENT DRAMA EXPOSES VULNERABILITY OF

TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT

SUMMARY. THE F-10 REPLACEMENT DRAMA, WHICH COULD BE SUBTITLED  
TINDEMANS' PURGATORY, THREW INTO SHARP RELIEF CONSTRAINTS UNDER  
WHICH ANY BELGIAN GOVERNMENT MUST OPERATE AND SPECIFICALLY EXPOSED  
THE VULNERABILITY OF THE TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT. BY THE EXPEDIENT  
OF CONVERTING THE LWF AIRCRAFT BUY INTO A POINT OF CONTENTION  
BETWEEN BELGIUM'S FRENCH- AND DUTCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES,  
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TINDEMANS' ADVERSARIES PUSHED THE PRIME MINISTER OFF THE STATEMAN'S

PEDESTAL AND FORCED HIM TO WHEEL AND DEAL IN THE SWEATY POLITICAL ARENA. TINDEMANS REMAINS A BRIGHT FIGURE LIKELY TO REMAIN AT OR NEAR STAGE FRONT IN BELGIAN POLITICS FOR A GOOD MANY YEARS. BUT HIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN SHOWN TO HAVE ONLY TENUOUS CONTROL OVER ITS FATE. END SUMMARY

1. PRIME MINISTER LEO TINDEMANS FINALLY HAD HIS WAY THIS WEEK ON "THE ARMS DEAL OF THE CENTURY". HE GOADED HIS RELUCTANT COALITION CABINET INTO CHOOSING THE AMERICAN F-16 LIGHTWEIGHT FIGHTER TO REPLACE BELGIUM'S OBSOLESCENT F-104 FLEET, AND HE SURVIVED A SUBSEQUENT OPPOSITION NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION IN PARLIAMENT. BUT THERE IS NO REJOICING IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE. FOR THE PRICE OF A VICTORY WAS EXPOSURE OF THE WEAKNESS OF THE YEAR-OLD TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT.

2. THE PRIME MINISTER (WE ARE AUTHORITATIVELY TOLD) MADE UP HIS MIND FOR THE F-16 THREE MONTHS AGO. A SOLID MAJORITY OF HIS MINISTERS WERE OF LIKE MIND. YET HE WAS COMPELLED TO ENGAGE FOR WEEKS IN FILIBUSTERING MANEUVERS - TO THE GREAT ANNOYANCE OF BELGIUM'S PARTNERS IN THE FOUR-NATION REPLACEMENT CONSORTIUM - AND TO PERMIT UNNECESSARY HAGGLING WITH THE USG OVER DETAILS OF THE TERMS OF ACQUISITION. EVEN THEN HE HAD NO CHOICE IN THE END BUT TO PUT THE LIFE OF HIS GOVERNMENT ON THE LINE TO FORCE THE CABINET TO ACT. THE AIRCRAFT ACQUISITION DRAMA POINTS UP SHARPLY THE CONSTRAINTS UNDER WHICH THIS, OR ANY, BELGIAN GOVERNMENT MUST WORK UNDER AT THIS MOMENT IN HISTORY. AND IT DEMONSTRATED THAT LEO TINDEMANS, ONE OF THE FEW EUROPEAN LEADERS RECENTLY TO EMERGE WITH THE LOOK OF STATESMEN ABOUT THEM, HAS A LONG WAY TO GO TO ACHIEVE A DOMINATING POSITION IN THE ARENA OF BYZANTINE BELGIAN POLITICS.

3. TINDEMANS' POLITICAL WEAKNESS DERIVES FROM THE FAMILIAR DIVISION OF BELGIUM INTO FRENCH-AND DUTCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES. THE "COMMUNITIES PROBLEM" CLIMAXED IN THE LATE 1960'S WHEN THE LONG-AGGRIEVED FLEMISH COMMUNITY ACHIEVED ITS GOALS OF EQUAL STATUS WITH FRANCOPHONE BELGIANS. SUBSEQUENT CLASHES ON THE COMMUNITIES FRONT HAVE TURNED ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT ACCEPTED PRINCIPLES. EMPLOYING TACTICS OF COMPROMISE AND DELAY, TINDEMANS, A FLEMING WHO DOES NOT SET WALLOON TEETH ON EDGE, HAS HAD SOME SUCCESS IN FRUSTRATING THE EITHER-OR

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EXTREMISTS. BUT SUCH TACTICS CANNOT OBSCURE AN OBJECTIVE SITUATION DEEPLY DISTURBING TO FRANCOPHONE BELGIANS: EQUAL RIGHTS ON A SIMPLE ONE-MAN, ONE-VOTE BASIS TRANSLATES INTO POLITICAL HEGEMONY FOR THE 55-PLUS PERCENT OF BELGIANS WHO SPEAK DUTCH OVER THEIR BREAKFAST COFFEE. SINCE FLANDERS, WHERE BELGIUM'S POSTWAR INDUSTRIAL BOOM CENTERED, ALSO INCREASINGLY DOMINATES THE BELGIAN ECONOMY, WALLOONS SEE THEMSELVES THREATENED WITH THE KIND OF DISCRIMINATION FLEMINGS ONCE LABORED UNDER.

HOWEVER DECENT A FELLOW TINDEMANS MIGHT BE, FRANCOPHONES TEND TO REGARD BELGIUM AS GOVERNED TODAY BY A POWER-THIRSTY CLIQUE OF FLEMISH POLS.

4. THERE IS SOME JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS BELIEF. THE TINDEMANS COALITION LINEUP HOLDS 115 SEATS, OR AN EIGHT-VOTE MAJORITY IN THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT. OF THE 115, NEARLY TWO-THIRDS, 71, ARE OCCUPIED BY DUTCH-SPEAKERS. THE HARD CORE OF THE COALITION IS TINDEMANS' OWN FLEMISH SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (CVP) WHICH HOLDS 50 SEATS. THE POLITICAL CENTER OF GRAVITY IN BELGIUM TODAY IS CERTAINLY IN FLANDERS. HOWEVER, FLANDERS' STRENGTH IS ALSO THE GOVERNMENT'S WEAKNESS. THE FRENCH SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (PSC) HAS NOTHING LIKE THE SIZE AND PRESTIGE IN WALLONIA THAT ITS SISTER PARTY, CVP, HAS IN FLANDERS. THE TWO SMALL FRANCOPHONE PARTIES WHICH TINDEMANS COAXED INTO HIS COALITION WOULD BE OF MINOR INTEREST EXCEPT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER NEEDS THE HANDFUL OF VOTES OF BOTH TO MAKE A MAJORITY. ONE OF THEM, THE RASSEMBLEMENT WALLOON (13 SEATS), HAS NO DOCTRINE BUT TO DEFEND WALLOON INTERESTS AGAINST ALL COMERS. IT BELATEDLY JOINED THE GOVERNMENT ONLY BECAUSE IT FELT IT COULD FULFILL ITS MISSION AS WELL OR BETTER FROM WITHIN. IT ACKNOWLEDGES LOYALTY NEITHER TO THE PERSON NOR TO THE POLICIES OF PRIME MINISTER TINDMANS.

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CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 DODE-00 OMB-01 MC-02 TRSE-00

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5. THE SHAKY TINDEMANS COALITION SURVIVED A YEAR WITHOUT  
RUNNING INTO SERIOUS TROUBLE. IT DID SO BY AVOIDING OR  
COMPROMISING ISSUES THAT COULD ESCALATE INTO SHOWDOWN POLICY  
QUESTIONS. BUT THE F-104 REPLACEMENT DECISION BECAME BOTH  
BIG AND UNAVOIDABLE AND IT NEARLY DID THE GOVERNMENT IN.  
TINDEMANS, TRYING TO HANDLE THE AIRCRAFT REPLACEMENT AS A  
TECHNICAL QUESTION, WAS CAUGHT APPARENTLY UNAWARE WHEN IN  
MARCH IT SUDDENLY SURFACED AS A COMMUNITIES ISSUE. IT WAS PROBABLY  
DEFENSE MINISTER VANDEN BOEYNANTS, FAST RUNNING OUT OF ARGUMENTS  
FOR THE FRENCH ENTRY IN THE REPLACEMENT SWEEPSTAKES, WHO WAS  
INSPIRED TO MAKE ADVOCACY OF THE MIRAGE A FRANCOPHONE CAUSE.

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IN A MATTER OF DAYS TINDEMANS' MINISTERS WERE ALMOST  
PRECISELY ALIGNED:  
FRANCOPHONE/MIRAGE - DUTCH-SPEAKING/F-16. IT TOOK THE PRIME  
MINISTER TWO MONTHS OF ELABORATE EFFORT TO CONVINCE HIS  
FRANCOPHONE MINISTERS THAT TO CHOOSE THE FRENCH AIRCRAFT  
WAS JUST NOT FEASIBLE. IN THE END EVEN VANDEN BOEYNANTS  
ACCEPTED THE INEVITABLE. THE LAST AND MOST DANGEROUS HOLDOUTS  
WERE THE SMALL BAND OF WALLOON MILITANTS, FOR WHOM REASON DOES  
NOT COUNT MUCH. ONLY A DIP INTO THE GOVERNMENT'S PORT BARREL  
PLUS TINDEMANS' EXPLICIT THREAT TO SADDLE THE RASSEMBLEMENT  
WALLOON WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR TOPPLING HIS GOVERNMENT - IN  
THE CONTEXT OF BELGIAN POLITICS AN ALL BUT SUICIDAL ACT FOR  
RW - SUFFICED TO BREAK THEIR RESISTANCE.

6. IF RW HAD JUMPED OFF THE CLIFF, THE NEXT BELGIAN GOVERNMENT  
MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN FORMED BY TINDEMANS - EITHER A MINORITY  
COALITION OR A BIG COALITION WITH PARTICIPATION OF THE BELGIAN  
SOCIALIST PARTY. IN EITHER CASE, TINDEMANS WOULD BE HARD PUT  
TO RUN A STRONG GOVERNMENT. POLICIES WOULD BE COMPROMISES  
NEGOTIATED WITH RIVALS AND ADVERSARIES, EITHER OUTSIDE THE COALITION  
IN THE FIRST INSTANCE OR INSIDE THE COALITION IN THE SECOND.  
AND THE PRIME MINISTER WOULD ALWAYS BE VULNERABLE TO SUDDEN  
FORMATION OF A COMBINATION DIRECTED AGAINST HIM. THAT IS TO  
SAY THAT THE F-104 REPLACEMENT CRISIS DEMONSTRATED THAT BELGIAN  
POLITICS REMAIN PRETTY MUCH WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN IN THE PAST  
DECADE: A NON-STOP CONTEST WITH DISPARATE INTERESTS CEASE-

LESSLY COMBINING AND RE-COMBINING AND ONLY EXTREMISTS OF THE  
RIGHT OR LEFT EXCLUDED FROM THE GAME.

7. AS FOR TINDEMANS PERSONAL PROSPECTS, HE IS AN ADEPT  
POLITICIAN WHO PLAYS THE BELGIAN GAME WELL. HE WILL NO DOUBT  
BE A LEADING FIGURE ON THE NATIONAL SCENE FOR A DECADE OR MORE.  
BUT HIS SHADOW SEEMS TO BE JUST A BIT SHORTER TODAY. JUST  
BEFORE THE AIRCRAFT REPLACEMENT CRISIS FLARED, TINDEMANS, THE  
BELGIAN LEADER, WAS MUCH PUBLICIZED IN THE WORLD PRESS, CONFERRING  
WITH MAO, CONSULTING WITH Giscard, DINING WITH PRESIDENT FORD.  
HE WAS THE COMMON MARKET'S "WISE MAN" AND FAST BECOMING A  
RECOGNIZED FIGURE ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE. ALL THAT REMAINS  
TRUE. BUT A HANDFUL OF ALMOST ANONYMOUS WALLOON POLITICIANS  
HAVE DEMONSTRATED ANOTHER TRUTH: BACK HOME IN BELGIUM LEO  
TINDEMANS, PROFESSIONAL POLITICIAN, HAS TO WORK HARD JUST TO  
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KEEP HIS JOB. FIRESTONE

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## Message Attributes

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